

The History of NAMI National, NAMI Pennsylvania, and NAMI PA Cumberland and Perry Counties

Written by Emily Shrader December 2011

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NAMI is a grassroots membership organization that is organized and active at the national, state, and local levels.

NAMI NATIONAL

NAMI's National Organization was founded in 1979 in Madison, WI. It was started by two mothers whose sons were diagnosed with schizophrenia. These women were upset with the lack of services for their sons and the mothers were tired of being blamed for the sons' mental illnesses. The women came together, became active, and brought together a group of people who were also dissatisfied with their mental health services. These individuals networked and sent out invitations, inviting community members to their first planning meeting. A dozen or so people were expected to attend but more than 100 people, also dissatisfied with mental health services, attended this meeting. The organization grew from that point to what is now known as NAMI.

An important figure in the national NAMI movement in the 1980's and 1990's was E. Fuller Torrey. In the 1970's he wrote a book called "Surviving Schizophrenia." This book debunked the myths of schizophrenia and eliminated blame for family members by emphasizing the connection of mental illness to brain dysfunction. Dr. Torrey's work comforted many individuals with serious mental illness and their families.

NAMI PA

In the mid 1980's NAMI PA adopted its bylaws developed by Bernard White. In the early 1990's NAMI PA bought its current double brownstone building and renovated it. NAMI PA was known nationally in the 1990's for its work on seclusion and restraints and is still at the forefront of this movement. Within the last 10 years, NAMI PA has held successful yearly conventions with various keynote speakers. In 2002, NAMI PA's convention in King of Prussia had an attendance of 500 people with Surgeon General David Satcher as the keynote speaker. Today, NAMI PA continues to grow at the state level.

NAMI PA C/P COUNTIES

What is now known as NAMI PA Cumberland and Perry Counties (NAMI PA C/P) was founded in the 1980's by Richard and Jewell Dennison and Charles and Jean Pisano. In the 1980's when the organization was founded, it was first known as AMI of PA (Alliance for the Mentally Ill of PA). The Cumberland/Perry counties chapter was known as AMI Cumberland County. In the 1990's the name Alliance for the Mentally Ill was changed to the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. After 2005, the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill became the National Alliance on Mental Illness and adopted its acronym "NAMI" as its name because of the stigmatization that surrounds the term "mentally ill" as defining a class of people.

In its early years, NAMI PA C/P Counties principal functions were to provide support to its members and to track the activity of the local MH/MR office. One support group per month was offered at the YMCA and then later at the Stevens Center and STAR.

Within the last 10 years, NAMI PA C/P Counties began providing evidenced based educational services. These services included a family-family class, peer-peer class, Hearts and Minds, and WRAP. These classes supported both family members and consumers. The classes also educated consumers about physical wellness and helped them to create a wellness recovery action plan.

More recently, NAMI PA C/P Counties has increased its number of support groups to two per month in Carlisle and Mechanicsburg. It also continues to provide educational services to consumers and family members. NAMI PA C/P Counties now has a website that is coordinated with the national NAMI. It also has been sending out newsletters to its members and friends for the last 14 years. Currently, the newsletter is now converting to e-mail distribution.